My Memoirs by James Villotti

The war in Southest Asia was not a subject which I often thought about before 1964. In fact, I think about it more today. The daily killing and everyday just plain miseries of war were nothing more than brief moments associated with a news broadcast, but events took place which did and will continue to influence my life.

In 1964, we were still at Lowry Air Force Base. That year was not one of my best. I and a few thousand other Captains in the Air Force fell victims of the Grade Limitations Act passed by Congress which basically said, here are over 5000 Captains eligible for promotion, but we have only 1700 Major slots which can be filled. I was not one of those 1700 who were selected. My concern, therefore, was not one of going to war, but wondering if I would be selected for Major next year. If not, I would be forced to give up a way of life I was accustomed to for 15 years.

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I was interested in listening to the war stories of men who had returned from Viet Nam such as Lt. Bill Fisher and Maj. John Vendon. Bill flew C-123's on defoliation missions, and John flew the old Gooney Bird on psychological warfare missions dropping leaflets, money, free passes and safe conduct chits, and everything else they could get on board. There weren't very many Air Force pilots who had served their tour yet but most organizations usually had somebody who had. John and Bill were our links to an ever-increasing commitment in Asia.

The next year I was promoted and we were sent to Sheppard Air Force Base. I was a Flight Commander in the helicopter school. Most of our graduates were being assigned to Southeast Asia. Also that year, more and more of the instructors were also trading the white helmet for the camouflaged one. Their replacements were pilots who had finished their remote tour with various helicopter organizations in Thailand and South Viet Nam.

I felt self-conscious associating with these men, especially during formal social affairs. I stood by them with my two little medals hanging on my mess dress coat in contrast to the rows of decorations which visually displayed their mighty deeds in combat. I wanted those medals, too, but I did not want to pay the consequences necessary to get them. I wanted no part of a jungle war, even in the relatively safe confines of a helicopter cockpit.

Two things happened which changed my mind. One was a threat, and the

other was personal. First, personnel officers from Headquarters A Force conducted a series of briefings at Sheppard. They desperate needed experienced pilots for search and rescue operations and counter-insurgency activities.

The biggest pool available for this helicopter experience was at Sheppard. We were told that it was a 100% guarantee that any pilot who had not served in Southeast Asia would be there before the year was up. They also told us that if we would volunteer to go, we could fly the type of helicopter we preferred. I must say they kept their word on both accounts. Most of us were in Viet Nam during the following months flying the aircraft we listed as first choice. I volunteered to go and fly the H-3 because I wanted no part of the in Rescue. Since we had more H-43's there than any other helicopt a greater percentage of graduates ended up in that bouncing, vibrating, thrashing machine with the upside-down tail held together by wires. The H-43 was not for me under any circumstances. Nor was rescue.

The other thing which changed my mind was a growing desire to share the experience of those pilots returning from Southeast Asia. I know this does seem contradictory. On one hand, I wanted no part of it on the other hand I wanted to be an active participant. This dichotomy persisted throughout my entire tour.

My volunteer statement to fly the H-3 was accepted and I was give July 1967 port call out of Travis. I now reversed my position and

role at Sheppard. Instead of being a Flight Commander and instructor in the H-19, I entered into the H-3 intial training program as a student, along with Ed Shearer who worked with me back at Lowry and Sheppard. After flying 30 hours in the H-3, we completed the program.

The situation at the port at Travis was unbelievable. Civilian contract DC-8's, 707's, you name it, were continually landing with hundreds of returning GI's from SEA and then loading up hundreds of new souls. The port was jammed, people were sleeping in chairs, benches, floors, corners -- wall-to-wall people. What was striking was the difference in atmosphere at various locations within the

terminal. At the inbound gates, wives, girl friends, kids, parents and returnees were smiling, crying and displaying happy emotions of being reunited once again. On the outbound side, the opposite effect of sadness, quiet discussions but mainly each person silent - caught up in his own thoughts of the uncertainty which lay ahead.

When each flight number was called and another 230 troops were loaded, you could tell that there were doubts of their returning to those standing half-heartedly waving goodbye from the other side of the fence. I was glad Adrienne was not there. It was much easier, in comparison, to have said our goodbyes back at Stapleton.

Once we took off, however, the noise level increased and men were again starting to get enthusiastic about going to Viet Nam and doing what soldiers are supposed to do - fight. There was a whole squadron of A-37 pilots on my flight - the first group of the "Tweety Bird" bunch to deploy. They were going to win the war very shortly after they got there - all dressed up in new green flight clothes with bright new name tags and rank. Little did they realize that the first thing they would have to do is take them off. Seems as if the enemy could spot bright patches and shiny rank and make them targets to place their cross hairs on.

Our first refueling stop was in Hawaii. Seeing those islands from the air was without a doubt one of the most exciting sights I have ever experienced. I have seen movies, film clips, and travel logs about the islands. All were inadequate in describing their beauty and the

perfect weather conditions. When I stepped off the plane and those famous Trade Winds blew across my face, I knew that this was truly a land of paradise and that I wanted to live there. We had an hour stop-over for refueling and I went into the terminal restaurant and odered a giant concoction of ice cream and fresh fruit. Delicious and also $1.80. I was to learn a year later that the price of living in paradise matches the pleasure you get out of being there.

From Hickam we flew to Guam. What a contrast from Honolulu. Hot, steaming and it felt like you were breathing water vapor, because the humidity was so high. It made you realize what it means to have those blessed Trade Winds coming across the area. As usual, the run to the local liquor package store was about as furious as the run to the men's room. Guam has always been a popular spot for stocking up on tax-free booze. I did need the "P" call but no spirits and was glad to leave for Clark.

The purpose of Clark Air Force Base during the Viet Nam conflict was multi-fold. To me, it meant three things. One, all aircrew members had to spend a week there going through the "snake school." - the Pacific Jungle Survival School. Second, it was a place where you would meet friends from long ago - either coming back, going, or on R & R status. They club never closed, was always jammed, had a continous party, made hundreds of thousands of dollars and lost much of it due to theft, pilferidge, mismanagement, etc. But it was still a jumping-off place where probably every Air Force officer who ever went to SEA unloaded a good portion of his money. Lastly, it meant

the last strip of Americana before the war area and a year of whatever lay ahead.

Snake school was terrible. It poured rain for five days and literally never let up. Mud slides occured in the training areas, and two students were killed when a wall of slime came down on their tent. Training for our class was terminated and because of the weather situation we didn't learn too much except that it sure could rain in that part of the world.

Next stop after Clark was Tan Son Nhut Air Base. We first exchanged our money into Military Script and were processed in-country through three days of cattle drives. Lines, lines, lines - going nowhere. Tan Son Nhut was the first stop for every person going into Viet Nam. It gave you a complete panorama of what was to be in store for the months ahead. Chaotic, over-crowded, dirty, smelly, hot, humid, constant motion - from transport planes taking battle troops in and out to fighters going out to bomb whatever the target was for that sortie. The entire scene was most depressing and at once gave a sense of insecurity, uncertainty and a lasting impression of hopelessness which, for me, lasted all the while I was in Southest Asia.

All the buses had wire covering the windows to keep hand grenades from being thrown in. Guards and security police were everywhere. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese were constantly moving on bicycles. With all this going on, including a constant bombardment of artillary surrounding the base and Saigon with a continous shower of

flares at night, the people showed no signs of concern or awareness of a war going on for years. Of all the places I have ever been, Saigon and Tan Son Nhut stood out as the two places I would never want to see again. Following my in-country processing and briefings, I boarded the C-130 shuttle run which was part of the airlift support thoughout the country. My destination was Nha Trang, home of the 1st Special Operations Wing. I was assigned to the 20th Special Operations Squadron which had H-1 gunships and H-3 helicopters with forward operating locations at Ban Me Thout, Udorn, Thailand, and Tan Son Nhut. The Heuys flew out of Nha Trang and Ban Me Thout. H-3's operated out of Tan Son Nhut and Udorn.

I met the Squadron Commander and he still had not decided which H-3 location I would be assigned. He indicated that it would be at Saigon and I suddenly got that terrible sinking feeling in my stomach.

Fortunately, Al Diveney, Hoppie Hopkins, and several other pilots whom I knew from Sheppard came in that same day from Udorn. They pursuaded the Commander to assign me to Udorn because I would be badly needed there as many instructors and flight evaluators were rotating. They were soon going to be hard pressed to find enough experienced helicopter pilots to run the operation. They managed to sell me enough to sway his mind for a Udorn assignment. I happily began to process out for Thailand and within a week climbed aboard a beat-up C-47 and headed for the land of Siam.

We overflew the rain jungles of Laos and landed at Udorn. What a

contrast between Viet Nam and Thailand. There were no ravages of many years of war. Very little hunger, happy people, quiet countrysides, land not marred by hundreds of thousands of bomb craters which made the Viet Nam landscape appear as the moon surface. I was thankful to be there.

My first shock, however, came almost immediately after getting off the Gooney Bird. I suddenly realized that the guys back at Nha Trang weren't kidding when they said most of the experienced guys would be rotating. I didn't realize that they would be leaving on the same Gooney Bird I got off of. They were on their way out right after the thing was refueled. It was, "Hi, Jim, good to see you," and in the same breath, "Bye, take care, and fly high." There were, of course, some instructors and aircraft commanders who would still be around, but they, too, would be leaving in two months. Hoppie, Al and Nick Conti had October rotation times. Ed Shearer, Roger Erickstad, K.V. Hall and I would soon be picking up the load of taking the new B-52 pilots, C-124 guys, and old duffs who were pumped through helicopter school, and getting them training in flying combat missions, which we first had to learn ourselves.

I took my gear to the "Pony Express" hooch. Each room had four bunks but we only had three guys to a room. This allowed us to have a few extra beds for friends passing through. The room would be my home for the next 12 months. There were black curtains stretched across half of it. A desk, a couple of chairs, and two lamps were on one side. Of course, expensive tape decks and speakers were also part of the

decor. It was hard to buy essentials at the BX but Teac and other $500 units were in abundance. Everyone had to have one. The other side of the curtains hid the bunk beds and lockers.

Each "hooch" had three to four Thailand girls to take care of cleaning, laundry, boot shining, fresh fruit supply and other services depending upon individual needs. All of that cost each of us $2.50 a month.

Nick, Hoppie and Al gave me a quick run down on the base, the various organizations spread around and an overall briefing of the "Pony Express" mission. I was quickly scheduled for mandatory briefings before I could fly. These covered intelligence, rules of engagement, local customs, do's and don'ts, the town of Udorn and a mish-mash of other topics.

I got my personal equipment in order. Had a ballistic helmet fitted. Was surprised to see how heavy they were. Jungle fatigues, jungle flying boots, black identification patches for all military clothing, survival vest, radios, canteens and pounds of stuff I would soon be packing around with me every time I flew. I had already made up my mind to get as much movie film taken so I loaded up a good supply for the Bolex.

After I got settled in, I started to get the details of our mission. All answers to the who's, where's, why's and how's started to fall into place. What made this part easy was the fact that good friends

were giving me information I needed. Many pilots from Sheppard and other assignments were working with me. As the Operations Officer, I needed all the help I could get and I was thankful they were there. Having friends around makes even the most undesirable situation at least bearable. After absorbing several days of ground school, I was now ready to get my feet wet. But first, you had to go get checked out in town - Udorn.

Udorn is the provincial capital in Thailand. As with all oriental cities, the ancient and modern were intermixed, always with the same result - open contradiction. A modern hotel was next to the shabbiest dwelling or place of business. There were shops after shops with the majority of them also the living quarters of the owners. The small children were naked. The overall smell was offensive, persistent and amplified by the Klong - the canal right through town. The Klong was the city's answer to a sewage plant. Thank heavens the monsoons washed it clean every six months.

There were three things you had to do in town. First, hire a taxi for 25 baht and a death-defying trip from the base into Udorn. If you survived that, you had to go to one of the jewelry stores and invest a month's pay on: Princess rings, bronzeware sets, ivory chess sets, four-seasons gold bracelets, black star rings and pins, ruby bracelets for the high-minded shopper, and of course, the famous Seiko watch, the best item for trading with the mountain tribesman. Especially for those with "black face, shine in dark" features. Any money which was left over had to be spent in Armajiets - the friendly Indian tailor.

Party suits, sports suits, dress suits and shirts were his specialty. Like all good Americans, I did my solumn duty to support Thailand's economy as much as possible. I got rings for Adrienne, Anne, Lisa and Mara. Got a good deal on bronzeware, service for 12. That shiny set refused to stay even acceptably dull when used. Brass candle holders, a chess set, a black star for my ring - never could get the stone from moving in the setting - are but some of the tourist bait items I succumbed to.

As far as the suits were concerned, I had three made up. Very beautiful. Wore one on R & R and gave all the rest to the Salvation Army when I came home. The mod look was there to stay and the cut of the suits I had tailor-made made me feel like a stand-in in an old Humphrey Bogart movie when I tried them on - including the tux. But I did help to keep the Thai balance on payments up even though mine was in deficit.

I liked being in town and went in every free moment I had. The Thai boxing matches on Wednesday were a must. The use of both hands and feet was exciting to watch. But the betting going on was even more exciting. A wild and mad place.

It was now time to get down to more serious things; my check out as an instructor and flight examiner. I was scheduled for my first combat mission with Hoppie. We flight planned and set the thing up. Soon after takeoff, I forgot about everything I was supposed to know. The scenery was fantastic, and I was completely absorbed in looking at the

thousands of sights in this jungle land. I never knew where I was. My map reading was not up to this type of topography but I didn't care. Hoppie seemed to know what he was doing so I didn't pay too much attention. During the mission, I was all eyes. Wide open eyes. I saw, heard and did unbelieveable things totally new to me. What really jolted me happened as we returned. Hoppie signed me off as being fully qualified as an IP and Examiner. I didn't even know where I was, what I did and was so out of my element I didn't think I ever would. I soon learned that my checkout process was but an indication of what the whole war, at least my war, was about. Never any rhyme, reason, or purpose. Just fill the squares and hope for the best.

The 20th Helicopter Squadron was an unorthodox organization. The squadron headquarters was at Nha Trang, Viet Nam. Based at Nha Trang was the "Save" flight. About 20 UH-1P's, some slicks, and the rest gunships. They flew out of Nha Trang but operated predominently out of Ben Me Thout. That was an Army Special Operations Camp and the "Saves" worked with them. The 20th also had an H-3 flight at Tan Son Nhut where I nearly ended up. They mostly hauled trash, had a VIP taxi service for MACV and the 7th Air Force. Not too much of a combat role but had to put up with the Saigon harrassment all the time. The 20th's third flight was out of country in Thailand. On paper, the unit never existed. Because it was out of country, all the people assigned to the H-3 Pony Express flight were paid TDY expenses. Fantastic. Every three months we would all get in the same creaky Gooney Bird and go to Nha Trang. We would sign back in from TDY, go to Finance and get out per deim, spend a coduple of days down on the

beach, sign out TDY again and go back to Thailand. Like many other units, we "weren't there" because the head count restrictions were far exceeded. If you weren't on paper, you couldn't be counted. This "arrangement" paid for my trinkets and junk. At least it didn't come out of my normal pay check. In fact, my take home salary in those days was $850 a month. I made an allotment for $800 which took care of the family needs. I lived on the remaining $50 and with the TDY, hazardous duty and separation allowance gratuities, I was able to support the Udorn jewelers and tailors in the custom to which U.S. servicemen were expected to. It also financed most of the rest and recuperation week in Hawaii for Adrienne and me, and kept me in sufficient change for steaks and good gin and tonic refreshments.

I walked into the best possible situation by being at Udorn. I was the Operations Officer, aircrew scheduler, one of five instructor pilots and three flight examiners. I assigned specific crews to specific missions although I tried to keep some semblance of a schedule going. We held to it most of the time but the more demanding missions were flown by the most qualified and experienced pilots. It was only fair. The best guys got the worst mission but it was a matter of survival. I never once got any adverse feedback about this policy. I'm sure all the outfits did the same.

It was hard for the IP's, however. Not only did we have to fly the hard ones but we had to qualify and checkout the new troops. Most of them were not helicopter pilots from the old school but rather old pilots who were pulled in from B-52's, KC-135's, C-141's and other

non-fighter organizations. It was very difficult getting people who were used to flying at 40,000 feet and 450 KNT down over tree tops doing what helicopters are capable of doing. The IP's would average 80 hours of combat flying a month compared to 35-40 hours for the other pilots. But it did make the days and the tour go faster.

Our method of operation was very simple, but at the same time, very effective. Pony Express was the call sign of our aircraft. We were known as the "Gomer Getters" who operated Southeast Asia's most clandestine airline. We conducted special operations activities and the Gomers were the indigenous people we carried around. We dropped them off and picked them up from all sorts of missions in North Viet Nam, Laos and South Viet Nam. One day it was a road watch or an intelligence gathering team. It could be a hit and destroy team, or one involved in covert operations. The numbers ran from six man teams to a 200 unit special guerilla combat battalion. We always went in flights of at least two helicopters, but some missions needed 10 choppers.

Three days before a scheduled mission, the mission commander, usually the IP or most experienced pilot, designated by me as the lead aircraft commander, would go to the Wing Intelligence Section where he received sealed packages made up by the "CAS" - "Controlled American Sources" - people. After the crews studied the documents back at Squadron Operations, they were briefed by several CAS representatives who had all the latest particulars - intelligence data, contact points, location and the general mission scenario. Latest 3-D

photography was examined showing landing areas and pickup points. This was extremely important as these pictures outlined every minute detail present in confined, often hidden holes in the dense jungle just large enough to drop our helicopters in.

Once the wheres, whys, and whens were fully covered, the crews worked on the flight plan, taking into account the latest intelligence reports on the enemy battle of order. When all this was done, the crews had the rest of the day and following day off. This meant Udorn, sleep, club, pool, hobby shop, movie, or whatever.

Except for a few instances, most mission take-off times were between two to four in the morning. This would allow the crews to arrive at the forward operating location around day break.

The flights to these remote spots were not always routine, especially during the wet season. The heavy rains and cloud patterns always present from the ground up taxed our airmanship and navigation skills. Flying close formation in a helicopter is both demanding and hazardous under the best of circumstances. But add weather formation as another ingredient plus darkness and you have sheer terror, sometimes more than the enemy brought to bear. Mid-air collisions did happen. Why there were not more is beyond any explanation I could give. Some crews were lost when they flew into cloud-covered mountains. You would know something bad like that happened when the dark, murky cloud mist suddenly took on an orange color for a brief instant - and no answer your radio call was forthcoming. Flying for hours and hundreds

of miles to find a hole in the jungle was the most satisfying and challenging thing I ever attempted. Much of the area was uncharted and because of the weather patterns, the ground was not visible most of the time. But to come upon a predetermined set of coordinates and spot your "hole" gave me a confidence I never knew I had nor knew I could have. If nothing else, my 151 combat missions made me realize that I was as good as the other guy and many times a heck of a lot better. I always took the back seat during my life but my experiences and adventures in Southeast Asia instilled in me the realization that I can do anything anybody else can.

Once we found our area, we had to have visual and coded radio contact with the ground people before we touched down. Many of these places changed hands on a regular basis so it was always wise to know who owned the territory before you dropped in for coffee. And getting coffee was the first order of business. After having gotten up around 1 to 2 PM, flying for three to four hours, it was time for coffee. We would be met by another CAS agent. We always assumed they worked for the CIA or some clandestine intelligence agency. At times, depending upon the mission, there would be more than one. God, talk about characters - mostly bad ones. I felt we all had degenerated to a level as low as the enemy whom we called upon to defeat, defeat them because they represented an evil political system which was threatening our freedom and sacred way of life. Bullshit!! These CAS people to me were power hungry, sadistic mercenaries whose value for human life and dignity was on a par with the oriental philosophy. They controlled the Gomer, his existance, sustenance, pay, food, and

actions. They assigned the team mission, plan of attack, objectives and every aspect of his life. If he did not follow instructions, he would be hung by the thumbs, beaten, castrated, shot, pushed out of helicopters and other inhumane actions which were used as examples to the rest.

These were the people I dealt with once we were at our forward operating base. We had to watch to make sure they would not try to get us to do something we hadn't planned or that was beyond the capability of both the crews and the aircraft. I must admit, however, they weren't often wrong in what they said or in what they predicted would take place. They knew the area like I knew the mountains of Crested Butte. The VC had prices on their heads because of the years of personal battle and conflict with the enemy. I said they were sadistic merceneries, but I don't know how anyone else could do what they did day after day, month after month, year after year. Their job was dirty and you can't get good, clean cut American Joe college guys to do what they had to do. I don't condemn them but I do the system that put them there.

After coffee, the CAS guy gave us a detailed briefing of what he wanted us to do. Basically, our job was to pick up a team of Gomers who had been out doing their thing for weeks and sometimes months. Or we were to drop off a fresh team. The job of each crew and helicopter depended upon the number of Gomers involved. You had a good idea of all this from the initial briefings at Udorn but many times the situation would change in a day. The team could have made contact

with another team and joined up to come out together. Regardless of the number of people involved, we always tried to operate under the high bird - low bird concept. The low birds were those designated to pick up or drop off people. The high bird was used as a diversionary aircraft and to act as the rescue aircraft in case the low bird was hit or otherwise not able to make it out.

Following the CAS briefing, things started to get exciting. In fact, the scariest part of the whole operation was about to begin. The safety of the crews, and more importantly, the safety of the teams depended upon getting in and out of the drop-off point as quickly as possible, as quietly as possible with little or no helicopter maneuvering. To do this, you had to know exactly where to go, be aware of the best flight path in and out, and have a good visual impression of the landing zone to reinforce and confirm the 3-D photographs you analyzed during the pre-mission briefings. This was done by getting the mission pilots, along with the CAS man, into specially-built short takeoff, unprepared landing, fixed wing, Swiss aircraft. These Porters could take off and land within a couple hundred feet at about 30 miles an hour. They were flown by Air American employees. Air America was a CIA-fianced Southest Aisa airline. these pilots were wild men. I had more death-defying flights with them than I did on our missions. They would literally do whatever you asked + and more!! I never felt comfortable peering from an aircraft in a tight 80-degree bank with the tops of trees above me. I break out in a cold sweat every time I think about it. They would usually fly above the clouds, think they were over the spot they

wanted to see and spiral down through the overcast until they broke out. How many times that overcast was only a hundred feet or two above the ground. Any how many times we broke out over the Ho Chi Minh Trail looking into the eyes of the AAA (anti-aircraft artillary) batteries whose crews were more surprised than we were to see some crazy aircraft defying God, nature, and their own gun emplacements. What a crazy war!!

We would have our maps in hand, plot the flight path from the base camp to the drop-off point. Time the legs, note the special terrain features and get a good look at the landing zone. This would allow us to set up the best approach and know if we could land or would need to make a hover operation. Once we were satisfied, we'd head back to the camp - anywhere from 10-40 miles away.

These base camps were something else. They had numbers to identify them such as PS 7, 38, 32 or LS 20. Some were self-sustaining. PS 38 was headquarters of the 1st Guerilla Battalion. At times we just stayed there for days. It was relatively safe. PS 7, however, was a hell hole. It was seldom safe and we never stayed past dark. Even the CAS people and the Gomers pulled out at night. I really think the bad guys slept there and the Gomers had the place during the day.

We normally had from an hour or two following the recon flight in the Porter before our work began. That was time enough to recheck the aircraft, the weapons, survival gear, and for a lot of idle talk. Anything to take your mind off the upcoming mission. By then

everything that could be done was done, so there was no use rehashing it in your mind. In the meantime, our fighter cover was winging its way to a pre-designated rendezvous spot such as the elephant's ear, the rooster tail, and the cross bones locations which had a discernable feature when you viewed the topography from the air or on a map. Our cover was usually A-1's, call sign "Hobos" from Da Nang or Plekiu. These guys would do anything for you and saved our skins many times by getting right down along the tree tops strafing and putting Willie-P's and rockets into areas which were firing on us. Never met them face-to-face, but I felt I knew each one in a very special way. You were able to tell who you were working with after awhile by their voices. I take that back, I did meet one face-to-face. They were taking us across the trail one day into an area we always were uneasy about. As one of the A-1's was passing my right side, a battery of 37 mm opened up and the first several rounds took his wing right off. I saw the red flare from the canopy and seat ejection system go off and the pilot's chute open up. I stayed on top of him all the way down, had the hoist fully extended and was hovering over him as he was getting out of the harness. We had him onboard within a minute after he touched the ground and although we were taking fire, there was no damage to the helicopter. The Hobo pilot's only injuries were to his nose and face which he got during the ejection process. The following week we received a case of Jim Beam from the Hobo flight at Da Nang, along with a scroll of names and many thanks.

Our takeoff times were planned to get us to our Hobo join-up point and the landing zone exactly on a predetermined time. When we arrived, if

there were no identification panels visible or if there was even the slightest hint of something out of the ordinary, we red-lined it for all we were worth. A hovering helicopter is about the next best thing to a domestic turkey shoot you'll ever find. If things went the way we expected them to we came in for the drop-off or recovery. Normally, the drop-off missions were made into areas where you could land the helicopter, or at least set one gear on the ground. The pickups were something else. You couldn't always count on the team making it to a cleared area because they may have been in a fire fight or were on the run. Whatever the reason, many pickups were made by hoist. These were always very touchy and demanding. We attempted to get three Gomers on the hoist at one time. Whenever you had the hoist extended and human souls on the jungle penetrator, you were in your most vulnerable position. If you started taking fire, you couldn't take off with guys hanging on. I should say you normally couldn't take off dragging people through the trees. It would seem like an eternity before the hoist operator reported that they were on board. It was even worse when he reported that part of the team was on board and he was taking the hoist back down to bring up the rest. How often I felt like saying to hell with them and getting out. I never did. When you had everybody on board or off-loaded it was back to the base camps for refueling prior to heading for Udorn. The Hobos escorted us back, said good-bye, and returned to Da Nang. We would check over the aircraft for battle damage and then refuel it for the long flight home. All strips had 55 gallon drums of JP-4 dropped in by Air America. We always, however, took our own fuel with us, anywhere from three to seven drums in each aircraft. Our trusty but obstinant

gasoline motor pumps transfered the fuel from the barrels into the aircraft fuel system. If they failed, we pumped by hand. By now it would get dark and we were always hurrying to take off before it really set in.

The return flight was about the same as the flight down. Close formation, bad weather, dark, but coming home we were able to use navigation aids to needle our way back into the country. Tune in the TACANS, make contact with the Ground Control Radar sites, and breathe a little easier and share a small sense of accomplishment. I never knew if I was doing something worthwhile contributing to some overall scheme to make it safe for democracy, but at least I knew I completed what I had been directed to complete. I never considered it a dumb game. Too many people were killed and guys in our own outfit died treating it as a game.

Once were were back at Udorn we debriefed with the intelligence people, stored all the equipment dragged out that early morning, piled in our trucks and headed for the club. A big meal, steak, of course. Good, bad, tough, tender, for me it was always steak along with several G and T's. I never drank gin and tonic for 35 years but that became part of my routine. Never varied - just G and T's and steak.

Each mission was different, but in many aspects some things were common to all of them. The most striking was the scenery as you flew over hundred of thousands of square miles of jungle. No matter where you looked, it was beautiful with different areas offering unique and

striking features within themselves. Triple canopied trees, hundreds of feet high, packed so close together that they kept sunlight and human intrusion out. They also kept hidden and confined all life and activity beneath an umbrella of changing green.

Countless waterfalls cascading down jagged walls of karst were concealed from view until you were suddenly on top of them as they plunged thousands of feet down narrow ravines creating great clouds of mist as they entered deep blue pools at their bases.

What seemed like small, placid streams would change to raging torrents as they followed the contours to lower elevations. All of these waterfalls and rivers attributed their source to the intense and fierce monsoons which came and went as predicatably as the rising and setting of the sun. Never have I seem such heavy unending rains as in Southest Asia. They inundated the entire subcontinent. Land that was green and natural suddenly took on the look of a giant mirror as hundreds of thousands of rice fields and patties filled with water reflecting the sky, clouds, forests and all their surroundings.

I flew for far distances and all I could see was terraced rice fields in all directions. Enough rice was grown there to feed the free world. Control of the rice-producing areas was a strategic military objective for both sides. Whoever controlled the bread basket of Southeast Asia controlled the minds and wills of millions of people. In sharp contrast were the mountains of karst - a volcanic material which dominated large sections of the country. They could be compared

with our Badlands and movement through them was virtually impossible. What made them even more hostile was the constant cloud bases which covered their jagged peaks, hiding them from view. It was always a good idea to climb up just a little higher when you had to fly on instruments over these uninhabited areas.

Despite all elements which could suddenly turn hours of normal operations into moments of sheer terror, many missions were uneventful. They were flown as planned, no problems, no decisions and no puckering. There were also many times during which my ever-churning stomach, due to the Thai food preparation and water bacteria content, was thrown into high gear. The first of these moments to remember was my initial contact with enemy gunfire. There was always a sense of helplessness but also a need to duck, move, run. But when you are strapped in a seat and all you can move is your head and arms, ducking is impossible, you can't fly with your head down. Moving about is out of the question, because where can you go in a cockpit? You can't fly away because people on the ground depend upon you. I always did one dumb thing, however. I always looked the other way. If gunfire was coming from the right, I'd look to the left. Always had some replusion of being shot in the head.

There were many times I could hear the bullets impacting the aircraft fuselage even above the noise level of our own gunners returning the fire. Several times they would shatter the glass as they tore into the cockpit. It was a novelty to hang up a piece of plexiglass full of bullet holes back in the hooch. But after awhile, the novelty wore

off and besides, there wasn't enough wall space in those small cubicles to accomodate all the war souvenirs.

Cruising along about 5000 feet above the terrain was a relatively safe environment. Once in awhile this safety was punctutated by AAA bursts which suddenly got our attention. You would suddenly realize that someone on the ground wanted to knock you out of the sky. Anti-aircraft fire is nice to watch - something like a 4th of July fireworks display. But the consequences are different. All you want to do is get away as fast as you can. Quick turns, changes of course, climbs to higher altitudes were some of the tactics which brought a little safety to you.

Even more spectacular was the visual effects of tracer ammunition streaking across the skies. The psychological impact was extremely vivid, especially when the gunners were beginning to get your range. At night, the impact was more startling but shorter lived. The ground gunners couldn't track as well and when they did, it wasn't for such a long time. All they had to go on was sound, a few lights or engine exhaust.

One real problem was hoist pickups, especially if the ground teams were being chased. When the hoist penetrator came down, they all wanted to climb on it at the same time and get pulled into the relative safety of the helicopter. But the hoist motor could not accommodate that type of weight. The first time it happened was on an emergency exfiltration. These were bad to begin with because you

always knew that the enemy was in close pursuit of the team and if they weren't extracted soon, it would be too late. Roger Erickstad and I went in as low bird to pick up a six-man intelligence gathering team. The area was not the best with high trees, so high that our hoist cable of 225 feet was too short to get to the ground. We had to maneuver our way down into the trees, watching that our main rotors and tail rotor didn't contact any limbs. The Hobos were overhead and it was they who first alerted us that we were taking on fire. They could see tracers coming from our "7 o'clock" position - a real blind spot. As soon as the VC opened up, all six Gomers hit the hoist at once and wouldn't let go. We were so power limited, with them holding on, I couldn't get into a higher hover or maneuver in an attempt to climb out and depart the scene. I told the hoist operator to hold out his hand with three fingers indicating to them that three was all we could take. This didn't work and I told Roger to fire a close burst from his automatic weapon and keep indicating three only. When 15 to 20 rounds came down close to them, they knew we meant business and were more of a threat to their security than the VC's who were only a few hundred feet away. Three let loose and we were able to get them up. The Hobo's were hollering for us to get out but looking down and seeing the others gaping back nervously anticipating their rescue kept us hanging in there. We did it. Lead Hobo then told us to pick up a certain heading, stay low and get on out. Back at the base camp we counted 37 hits throughout the airframe. Nobody was hurt.

There were other times things didn't turn out so well. When they refused to let go of the penetrator and we were taking it pretty badly

and it became paramount to get out fast, I told the hoist operator to cut the cable. He would then hit the firing switch which would activate a cartridge. This would shear the cable at the aircraft. It would then fall to the ground and free the aircraft for takeoff.

There were other situations which also overloaded the helicopter. This happened when you landed instead of hovered and went in to pick up large hit-and-run teams. Their purpose was to stir up as much trouble as possible and irritate the VC all they could. If they succeeded in doing this, they were usually one stride ahead of a bunch of bad guys in hot pursuit. We usually had six to 10 helicopters for these types of operations where we would haul about 25 Gomers in each aircraft. On one particular mission, everything went wrong. A flight of 10 dropped off a 200-man guerilla search and destroy contingent without any glitches. We were scheduled to return precisely in 2 1/2 hours to pick them up. As we were making our approach into the landing zone there was no indication that it would be anything but a routine exfil. But, just as we were coming into our touchdown, it seemed as if the entire rice fields along our right flanks opened up as if in a cemetery horror movie. Mortars were zeroing in on us and I could actually see the VC's coming out of their holes firing at us. Our flight crews returned fire but it was the Gomers who really saved us from capture or death. They came between us and the enemy, dropping down, returning fire with automatic weapons, getting up, retreating toward the choppers, dropping down and firing once more. For this mission, we had two flight mechanics on board rather than one. This allowed us to load and off-load the Gomers from both the main entrance

door and the aft ramp to save time and speed up the process. SSgt. Martelli was up front working the main door and old MSgt "Dad" Worthingham was on the aft ramp. We were the closest aircraft to the retreating Gomers and they were piling on board through both entrances. There was a lot of radio chatter, weapons firing, Gomers hollering, and unorganized chaos. VC finally zeroed in on us and all of a sudden the whole cockpit seemed to explode. Our front windshields were blown out and slugs ripped through the cockpit area. My back became very hot and numb. I could hear Dad Worthingham say he couldn't get the aft ramp up. I said, "Don't sweat it." Martelli said, "We are loaded, let's get out." I applied max power, lifted off and started moving forward, but not very fast at all. I couldn't get the nose down far enough - we were out of balance and tail heavy. I yelled at Martelli to start pushing them forward, even get a couple of them in the cockpit area. He did and I was then able to get the nose low enough to gain airspeed and climb. We were sitting ducks all along and I don't know how we got off. The Hobos again were doing a superb job of putting ordinance into the area that the heavy concentration of fire was coming from. When we finally got to our cruise altitude, I realized I had been hit in the back. My whole left side was numb and I transfered control over to my co-pilot. About this time, Martelli called over interphone that some Gomers were also wounded but he hadn't any idea of how many or how badly because they were packed in like sardines.

When we landed, we were astonished to learn several things. First, we had taken 39 Gomers onboard. Our capacity was 25. No wonder our CG

(central gyro) was out of balance. It's a miracle we got off the ground at all. Six were wounded and one was dead. The other shock came when we finally got them all out. Dad Worthingham was gone. We didn't know if he fell out, slipped away after landing, which would be highly unusual, or what. Before I could even think of an explanation or plan a course of action, another wave from our flight came in and who steps out of the Air American helicopter but old Dad himself - face white as snow - even though his golden tan was still evident on his arms. He had gotten out of our helicopter after all, attempting to close the aft ramp. A cardinal sin - you never leave the aircraft without explicit permission of the aircraft commander. He got out, started pushing the ramp up and at that time we started lifting off. When that happened, he said the whole world closed in around him. Here he was, unarmed, except for his 38, in the middle of a raging fire fight, mortars going off everywhere and he is standing in the middle of a giant rice paddy, shocked, helpless, and completely alone. An Air American pilot luckily spotted him as his aircraft was being loaded and he hover/taxied over to Dad who didn't need to be told to get onboard. In all the confusion, Worthingham had said he was getting off to bring up the ramp. He assumed I heard him but of course I didn't. A harrowing experience which turned out to be a good conversation topic worth many laughs. One of many such experiences with a happy ending.

My back was still numb. I took off my restraining harness, flack vest and survival vest. The slug went through the back of my seat, through the flack vest and skimmed along the middle of my back. Nothing a

good cleaning and some bandages wouldn't take care of. Within a few days, it felt all right.

We stayed in the jungle for five days during that operation. The following morning, we got another shock. About 5:30 AM my flight mechanic came running to where I was sleeping. He was so excited he could hardly talk. All I could make out from his jabbering was the phrase, "One of our helicopters is missing." Now how in the hell could anybody steal a 20,000 pound aircraft parked several hundred feet away and us not know about it? The whole bunch was awake by now and we all started heading toward the parking area. It was still dark so several of us took our flashlights along. Sure enough, Gene Williams' helicopter was gone. We proceeded to do what any disciplined military group of men would do, especially since we only had on combat boots and shorts. We milled aroud, mumbled and scratched.

The sun was beginning to cast its first morning light and we could see the tire tracks leading away from the H-3's parking spot. The chocks were still in place. We spotted the helicopter and what that crazy thing had done probably could never be duplicated again. There it was, 200 yards away, down a hill nestled in a grouping of trees, apparently without a scratch on it.

During the night when the hot steaming temperature of the jungle cooled off, the pressure in the brake hydraulic lines bled off. Also, the air pressure in the tires dropped off sufficiently to allow the

wheels to roll over the restraining chocks. The area was not level with a fairly good incline. All the circumstances were perfect to start the aircraft on its flight of freedom. It winged its way down the slope, through a hillside lined with trees and didn't hit any of them. Gene started it up, hovered out and set it back down on the parking ramp. What a week that was. Bob Frost stepped in a sink hole, badly spraining his ankle, sat for two days with his foot soaking, missing all the action including a few medals for some heroics we were all making out like.

We were also fortunate (?) to have our Squadron Commander come over from Nha Trang to fly with us. A real bastard he was. Whenever there was a chance of his getting a medal on a mission, he was there. Not to contribute to the effort, but to reap the awards and glory. He flew as my copilot the day we got hit so bad. He got a small sliver of glass on his cheek when the bursts came into our cockpit and it drew some blood. No more than he would get shaving but for him, that was his Purple Heart. When we got back to Udorn he went through the process at the hospital. I refused to even have them take a look at my back because we would have gotten one together. I wanted no part of any award with him. He really showed his true colors and professionalism a few months later.

There were six American pilots running around the ground about 15 miles west of Hanoi. An EB-66 crew, a F-105 Wild Weasel crew and an F-4D crew. The Jollies and Sandys tried for three consecutive days to get them out but the Rescue Task Force was forced back by intense

ground fire. They also had to contend with the MIG's who were playing in their own backyard up there. The Rescue folks finally called off their efforts to bring them back. I got a phone call from the Operations Center saying I was to get some people over to NKP for a special mission briefing that morning at 0900. K.V. Hall, Ed Shearer, Roger Erickstad and myself took a bird and reported to the Intelligence Section. We were met by big wigs from the 7th Air Force Joint Personnel Recovery Center out of Saigon. The center was commanded by an Army two-star general. His deputy was an Air Force Brigadier. We all sat down and an Army colonel briefed us. We were to take a three-ship Pony Flight into North Viet Nam and bring these pilots out. That basically was the mission. The first thing that entered my mind which I stood up and asked was, "That's a Rescue mission, how come the Jolly Greens aren't involved?" I was told that they had been but refused to attempt any further recoveries because of the untenable situation. I was wondering what we could do that they couldn't.

My thoughts were answered as the grand plan began to unfold before us by the briefer. This was the scenario. We were to fly special South Vietnamese commando teams who were dressed up in the North Vietnamese uniforms and drop them off in the vicinity of the downed American pilots. These commandos would make contact with the Americans, get them all together, we would then come in, pick them up, and fly back to NKP. On the surface it seemed like a reasonable thing to do. The A-1 Sandy pilots who worked with the Jollys in their attempts would accompany the Hobos and lead us into the area. What sounded like a

good plan began to take on doubts when the Sandy pilots expressed their reservations about any helicopter getting into that general area. But we would give it a go. We spent the rest of the day flight planning and then flew back to Udorn.

The next morning I led a flight of three H-3's back to NKP. We touched down about 2:30 AM and were escorted to the far side of the field. About that same time, one of the ominous C-130 Black Birds representing the special activites group touched down and taxied beside us. Covered vans pulled up to its aft ramp. About 30 Gomers dressed up like North Vietnam soldiers climbed onboard the vans. They were then driven over to our helicopters. Security controls were extremely tight. When they were all buckled down, we started up and began what was to be my most interesting, discouraging, disillusioning, and wildest experience of my life.

We joined up and headed north out of NKP at about 800 feet. Suddenly, KV Hall called saying he was loosing his main rotor transmission oil and was going down for an emergency landing. I told Ed Shearer to stay with me and we would follow him down. KV touched down and Ed and I were right along side. We landed in an open area about a quarter of a mile from a small Thai village. Suddenly things happened so fast and unexpectedly that we were totally unable to react to a chain of events which led to an international incident.

The South Vietnam special forces troops which we had onboard had been fighting the war for years and were part of a highly trained special

combat unit. For mission after mission, month after month. they were totally involved in assault landings. Whenever they jumped out of a landing helicopter, they were in bad guy country with VC firing at them before they took three steps away from the helicopter. Their whole training, in fact, their very survival, demanded that they get out and shoot at anything that moved. They understood no English and when the three of us touched down, there was no way for them to know what was happening. Little did they know they were still in Thailand.

The Thais are a very friendly and happy people. When the villagers heard our formation and saw it coming in for a landing close to their settlement, they were eager to see what was going on. Well, as soon as our wheels touched, the Gomers were out ready for blood. They had spotted the Thais coming to have a look and began to pour automatic weapons fire and grenade launchers in their general direction. All you could see was Thai butts scurrying for cover as the whole world exploded around them. It must have taken us five minutes to settle the Gomers down and convince them we were in no danger. Once things settled, it didn't take long for the villagers to show their hospitality in spite of the near destruction of their town and themselves. They soon were feeding the Gomers bananas, grapefruits, and other delicious tropical fruits always in abundance throughout the area.

I managed to contact the Sandy and Hobos who were coming to join us and asked for another helicopter from Udorn to replace KV's. Within

and hour and a half the whole gaggle was once more heading for the North Viet Nam border and our objective. We refueled at the last Lima site next to the border and from then on it was the Sandys' ball game. They had been up there with the Jollys and knew where we were going. It didn't take long before we realized why the Jolly's had given up. The whole sky lit up as 50mm tracers criss-crossed the air around us. KV's aircraft took a few hits but that was all. As we proceeded closer to Hanoi, it was evident that to insert these special teams covertly was out of the question. The whole countryside was populated with farms, villages, and was dotted with countless thatch huts. We could land, let the Gomers out but everybody in the surrounding area would know it and that would be suicide for our teams and maybe us. Suddenly, the sky turned yellow in front of us. AAA batteries were going off everywhere and the Sandys told us to do something nobody questioned. We did a 180 and got the hell out of there.

We landed back at NKP about nine hours after that early morning departure. The Army two-star was waiting along with his staff. It seems like the epsiode near the Thai village got very high level attention. Our South Vietnam Ambassador along with the US Ambassador to Thailand, the Secretary of State and numerous military advisors were discussing the incident with government of Thailand representatives. I guess it appeared for a short time that Thailand had been invaded by North Vietnam - an event certainly worthy of high level concern. I knew the ramifications of our small "invasion force" continued beyond that day, but we heard nothing more about it. In fact, I never gave it any more concern, although it was worth a good

laugh later on, especially since no one was hurt.

After we debriefed, the two-star said we were to try it again the next day. We did, and except for the shoot-up-the-Thai-countryside episode, the results were the same. They shot the hell out of us. Same debriefing, same orders - go again the next day. I had begun to doubt the sanity of all of this but we reluctantly took off for the third time. This time, we weren't so lucky, however. KV's crew chief got hit in the leg, two Gomers in my plane received wounds, and one in Ed's was killed. I couldn't believe what I heard following the debriefing. We were told to go again!!

At each one of these debriefing sessions our illustrious Squadron Commander was there. This time he wasn't flying with us. He was smarter that I thought and probably figured there were safer missions where he could get more medals. He never said a word, but I finally did. I asked the two-star general just what it was the Joint Personnel Recovery Center was trying to prove - meaning him, of course - but I wasn't that direct. I went over our missions, explained we could never do what we were ordered to do. Besides that, the emergency signals supposedly coming from the downed crew members were stronger - when they should be getting weaker. I finally said that if the mission was political to show that the U.S. was heavily involved in getting out downed crews even close to Hanoi for back-home propaganda purposes, then tell us and we could plan the mission and react accordingly. But if we were really expected to do what we had been ordered to do the past three days, then it was simply a suicide

mission, badly thought up with no possible chance of success.

There was a terrible silence in the room as the two-star stared back at me. The Lt.Col. who lead the Sandys broke the silence as he added, "He's right, General." The General looked back to me and said, "I'll take care of you later, Major, but for now your crews are off the hook. I'll have the Army chopper people take over from here." He did. The next morning four Army Hueys headed north with the Gomers aboard. They were never heard from again. Nor did I hear from the Army General, his Air Force Deputy or the Joint Personnel Recovery Center. My Squadron Commander was something else. Of all things, he couldn't figure out how in the world I could have embarrased him in front of all those people!! I don't remember all that I said to him. That was the only time I was ever disrespectful to a superior during my entire military career. All my feelings toward him came pouring out. He never said a word, but he had the last one on my efficiency report - a primary factor of why I never made full Colonel. But frankly, it was worth it. I'm alive and well. Not like the Army crews.

Working for the Army high command was much different than working with the Army helicopter pilots. I made some good friends with the Grunts. Whenever there was some mission which required the power and lift capacity greater than our H-3's, they would bring in the CH-47 hooks from various Army transportation companies. They were quite a bunch. Although we flew the same mission, took off from the same base and landed at the same spot, we never flew with them. They believed that

the only way to get from Point A to Point B was to fly a straight line between them. It didn't make any difference what was in between. If there were enemy concentrations along the route, we would go around, but not the grunts. They'd go straight over, shooting all the way. When they landed, the first thing they would do is strip and clean all the weapons. Next it would be to light a fire. The crew chiefs and gunners cooked our meal while the pilots broke out their "emergency ration" box of excellent liquor and mix. Everyone had a before-meal drink. We'd eat and only then would they take care of their helicopter needs. I must say they had their priorities right. Many of them had three tours in Southest Asia. I would have had different priorities too if I knew I would spend three to four years doing what we were doing. A great bunch of men.

The episode of the Gomers and the Thai "invasion" was caused by lack of communications. None of the hundreds of Gomers I hauled around during all those missions spoke English. I didn't even know what they spoke. This factor was always a constant cause of worry to us. It wasn't a problem when we were taking them in because we first picked them up at some base camp while the CAS guy supervised the whole affair. We dropped them off at some predetermined hole in the jungle. But exfilling them was another thing. The only way we made contact with the team was by coded, colored, panel cloth shaped into some symbol. If we saw the panels and they told us what we wanted to know, we'd come in and land. You would never see a Gomer until you were down on the ground when suddenly they would appear from the jungle covering. It was impossible to tell if they were, in fact, the good

guys you were picking up. Everyone who wasn't American looked the same, especially in combat dress. The only sure was of knowing if you were right was if they didn't shoot at you. Sometimes we were wrong when our exfils were compromised with dire consequences. To sum it up, coming in for a pickup was always a puckering experience because you didn't know what or who would be greeting you.

There are two other events I want to recall. Once because it was a tragedy and the other because it was an encounter with disaster in a most unexpected way. As I said before, whenever we had an emergency exfil, it was usually bad and unpredictable. Jay Oberg and I were sent in to pick up a team who was on a short, but important, intelligence-gathering mission. Apparently, they were carrying information about the main communications lines going from North Viet Nam into the Parrot's Beak area. They were being chased and it looked as if they would be overcome before we got to them. Whenever there was a possibility of a real quick extraction, and the safer means of using the hoist penetrator was too slow, we used the McGuire Rig. This was a very long rope affair with loops in it to secure feet and hands. The guys on the ground would simply grab onto the rope and we'd lift them up and fly away while they hung on. You would then fly to a safe area, let down, they would get off, and then you'd land and pick them up. We got to them but some were already wounded and all were on the run. Jay and I threw out the ropes; four grabbed mine and six were on his. The VC couldn't have been but several hundred feet away and as we were lifting away, they began to shoot at the dangling targets. Three were hit and knocked off Jay's rope. One

dropped from mine while we were at about 300 feet. There was no safe area nearby and we had to climb to 9000 feet to get across the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The six Gomers hung on and we flew over 80 miles before coming down to 6000 feet once we crossed the trails. Another one fell off Jay's rope enroute and when we landed, we had five remaining survivors whose hands had to be pried loose from around the ropes. It took a long time for me to get over that experience. I saw men die before, but as in all events, circumstances determine impact. Seeing those Gomers falling to the jungle floor was horrible.

The other event took place without benefit of the enemy claiming victory. Ed Shearer was my wingman and we were returning home from a routine mission. Ed and I had known each other for a long time. We were together at Lowry flying the SAC missile site mission. We went to Sheppard together where he was in my flight of instructors and we went to Vietnam together. He was a very skilled pilot and fine officer. Returning home as we had so many times before, he was flying my right wing. All of a sudden, it happened -- a mid-air collision. Ed had run into me. Our rotor blades hit and we both went down. I had 11 people onboard and he had a like amount. I had very little control of the helicopter as it was porpoising like mad. We hit hard but level, thank God, and except for some very sore bones and bodies, everyone was all right. I never did see Ed or know what happened to him. We were eventually picked up later and then I learned that Ed and his group were okay. The Squadron Commander got the final licks there too as Ed's OER (officer evaluation report) was also one that you would want to pull out of your files and burn. The mid-air

collision occured only 10 days from the scheduled end of tour and departure for home. It became my last flight because I said to hell with it. Enough is enough. Ed didn't fly either because he was downgraded to copilot status and then left shortly after me.

There were some nice things to remember, too. One was the close, and genuine friendship I developed with my fellow pilots in the Ponys. Our logo was TPRS - THIS PLACE REALLY SUCKS. That acronym was seen all over Southest Asia. On clubs, latrines, trees, rocks, huts, helicopters, stationery, everywhere. And we would never tell anyone outside of the unit what TRPS stood for. I'll never forget walking down the hall at PACAF headquarters after I had been assigned there from Udorn. General Crane stopped me as we happened to pass each other and out of a clear blue sky, he asked me, "Villotti, what does TPRS mean?" I laughed and told him. He was a colonel and wing commander of the 453rd TAC Fighter Wing while I was at Udorn. We had TRPS even stenciled on his staff car. I still use it to affectionately describe how we all felt. The whole place sucked, the food, climate, war and whatever we were attempting to accomplish by our heroics.

But TPRS kept us all together and united. It was very evident by another saying we had - and proved. "There is always room at a Pony table." No matter how big or small the table - at the bar, mess hall, you name it, all the Ponys sat at that table. If two or three guys went to eat and sat down and four or eight more Ponys came in, they all sat at the same table. It was amazing but nothing ever wound up

on the floor, got spilled or tipped over. It was like the parable of the fish and loaves. No matter how many came, there was always room for more.

And, of course, you just had to go to the nightly movie. You were outdoors, with benches to sit on, and invariably you watched terrible flicks. I didn't know they made so many bad films but nothing is ever too good for the American GI. And rain, but you never walked out, no matter how bad it was or how hard it was raining, you stuck it out until the bitter end. Why? As we said, it killed another two hours off the tour. And counting the time remaining of your tour was very important and a major production. When you first arrived you had to get the best Playboy centerfold you could find. The picture was then divided off into 100 areas - no more and no less. Each area was then numbered from 1 to 100 and when you had passed the 265th day of your tour, it was time to start marking and filling in the 100 blocks on the calendar - starting with 100 and going downward. That was always a great day and it called for a party when someone reached that plateau. Needless to say, you very selectively numbered those areas covering the main ingredients of the figure with the lowest six to 10 numbers. The final number one area was blocked out the morning you got up, all packed, tickets in hand, ready to board the out-of-country passenger flight. The location of the number one area didn't vary too much for thousands of guys.

Adrienne K. Villotti
[redacted]
Mascoutah, IL 62258

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